DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 836 PS 024 337

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TITLE [Children's Rights Council--Move Away in Divorce Panel.]
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Children's Rights Council (10th, Atlanta, GA, April 24-28, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attachment Behavior; Child Custody; Child Development; Childhood Needs; *Divorce; *Emotional Adjustment; *Family Problems; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Role; Psychological Patterns; *Relocation; Separation Anxiety; Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the psychological processes and emotional experiences of children whose parents are going through the process of divorce and the complications posed by divorced or divorcing parents moving to new locations. The paper begins with a discussion of the implications of divorce, claiming that divorce is a change that affects everyone in the family and poses both risk and opportunity. Emphasizing that many parents will move away during or after a divorce, the paper also discusses the influence of divorce on custody, parent child relationships, child development, child independence, and the psychological leap required of everyone affected by a divorce. The second part of the paper focuses on children's understanding of divorce as well as their psychological experiences. For children in the face of divorce: Nothing Changes. Children exhibit attachment for their parents throughout their lives. Therefore, divorced parents need to provide an environment that is as supportive as possible for maintaining those attachment relationships. The paper concludes by noting that both the custodial and noncustodial parent must consider carefully how they will act in order to assist the child in maintaining contact and attachment with their parents and to ensure healthy child development. (MOK)

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ED 396 836

Children's Rights Council -- Move Away Panel

Presentation by Charles A. Zapf, MD, on Saturday, April 27 1996

Today, we are navigating our way through the choppy waters that lie at the interface between law and mental health. Divorce is difficult under the best of circumstances, and the topic today of move away families only complicates divorce issues further. It highlights the tension between the rights and needs of children and the rights and needs of parents. The law of the land and the law of the heart.

As a psychiatrist I deal with the law of the heart. In my practice I meet daily with people who have been touched by divorce in different ways: children whose parents are divorcing, parents, sometimes grandparents. Divorce is a change that affects everyone in a family. Each family member speaks to me in their own way. With adults we can sit and speak, using words to describe feelings. Parents speak of the pain of loss, their concern about their children. Grandparents may feel unsure how to be involved. But the language and nuances change for teenagers and children. Kids are still developing and so to communicate with them, I must adapt to their style. I must speak their language. For teenagers that may mean hearing about their social life -- who's on the phone, ways in which their parents are 'out of it', not 'cool' -- sex, drugs, and rock and roll. For younger children they will speak to me through their drawing or play. They, too, need to speak, but in their own medium. Drawings are also a way for children to speak.

When you look at their messages, then often the meaning is simple and straightforward. The laws of the heart tend to be enduring. As an example, let me tell you about the Middletown Study. A study by sociologists done over a span of 60 years looking at families and family attitudes. One question asked of kids at the beginning of the study: what quality do you appreciate most in your parents -- spending time together. That question was repeated then 60 years later -- answer was the same.

There is a similar enduring message in divorce. For kids, who are developing and have needs for approval, supervision and guidance, discipline, education, etc., in the face of divorce : Nothing Changes. They still need their parents -- maybe even more. There may be divorce, geographic moves, new schools, new step-parents , etc, war, pestilence -- nothing changes. It's as simple and as complicated as that.

That may be a difficult concept to hold onto in the face of a major transition like divorce. "Upheaval" may be more like it. Earthquake. For the parents, major emotions are unleashed - powerful feelings are ignited along with additional day-to-day stressors like work, money, living accommodations. Often the tremors were felt before the divorce and the tremors will end a year or more after the divorce. Regardless, the shock waves will be felt by the kids, and will be different depending on age. Generally, as they grow old enough, they can understand about divorce. And the effect will be different, depending on their age. But as they grow older, they will also be able to understand the concept of divorce. In essence, the idea that Mom and Dad don't love each other any more may be very painful but understandable, especially after a period of

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disagreements.

Like all major transitions, the Chinese symbol for crisis applies – danger and opportunity. The opportunity is for a child to have parents no longer engaged in arguing or depressed; the parents can become more available to pursue a gratifying life and, hence, be more available to their children. Better for the parents and better for the kids. The psychic energy that went into an unhappy marriage is now freed. But therein lies the danger, too. For there may be times when the needs of the child get lost as the parent renews and rebuilds their life – or continues the struggle.

Move away cases provide a particular challenge. The custodial parent moves away to start a new life – for whatever reason – a new job, to get married, to join family, get away from their ex-spouse. A good idea for the parent – but for the children – nothing changes. New schools, new friends, a new step-parent, whatever, their needs are unchanged. They still need parents. And so the question that now must be addressed is: how will those needs be met? If one parent moves away, how will custody and financial arrangements be changed so as to further and enhance the relationship with the noncustodial parent?

Under the best of circumstances, a child may spend long periods of time with one parent and then switch - spending a period of time with another parent. For example - Mom's home may be in Atlanta, where the child lives during the school year. But over Christmas and during the summer, she lives with her father in California. The child gets prolonged time with each parent – to learn the rhythm, flow and tempo of that parent's house - to know the rules, know the heritage from that parent, to work through disagreements as a way to understand enduring love. Time to develop memories of goofing around as well as being serious. The time with each parent need not be identical, but should be similar. This arrangement can also help the parents as they have a chance to be both custodial and non-custodial parent. I've found this increases one's capacity to forgive.

The real difficulty comes when a parent moves away and there are no arrangements made to compensate, psychologically, for the move. The greater the imbalance or polarization, the harder it'll be for the child. Imbalance - staying with one parent to the exclusion of the other. At the extreme of the continuum is the custodial parent who moves and then prevents communication with the noncustodial parent – blocks phone calls, destroys letters, etc., even to the extreme of the Parental Alienation Syndrome as described by Dr. Richard Gardner. There are no easy answers to this dilemma, and it is fortunately rare. These circumstances can particularly benefit from a sensitive judiciary system.

Most common is a custodial parent moving away, who neither actively blocks communication but doesn't actively encourage it either. And this is the area where greatest change may occur in how parents and children interact in divorce. Technically, the custodial parent has a role, called a "gatekeeper" which will affect the availability of the child to the noncustodial parent. Some may consider this a position of power; more properly, it shcoud be seen as a position of responsibility. A neutral or passive position by the custodial parent then leaves the noncustodial parent the full responsibility to maintain their relationship with the child. They must take the initiative. Repeated feelings of rejection, lack of appreciation or respect can reduce a noncustodial parents interest in maintaining a relationship with their child. It gets to be too hard, and so gradually, there's a decrease in contact. Maybe it's just easier to start a new life and forget about it.

Let me tell you about my friend , Richard . His son is now 15 y.o. and lives in Florida with his mother. For the last 8 years Richard has worked to maintain contact with his son - phone calls weekly or more, summer visits. Over the last year he found his son didn't want to talk on the phone - he was busy playing baseball and hanging with his buddies. And last summer he didn't want to come and visit. Richard went to his son's bar mitzvah and for 3 days felt out of place. Surrounded by his former in-laws who were not friendly, receiving minimal appreciation from his son, Richard came home angry - at his son, his ex- , and at the situation. Why should I submit myself to this? And for what? He asked. Gradually, he made less and less an effort.

This is not an unusual story for a noncustodial parent: where their involvement is greeted more as an interference than an addition. The cumulative effect can be to dampen the efforts of all but the most inspired.

This is also where the greatest change may take place. What would it take for my friend to continue to pursue his son, even in the face of these obstacles? To meet with the school councillors, the baseball coach, arrange to speak in person or by phone to the important people in his son's life. In our modern world no place is very far away, by plane, phone, or fax. But it is a big psychological leap. Time and money help -- but more important in maintaining initiative, to persevere when there is no logical reason, is the support that comes from friends, other parents - especially single parents, and organizations like this one.

It is easy to fall into the pattern of blaming an ex-spouse, seeing the opportunities that are denied and forgetting the options that are available. My friend may be so pained by the situation, he forgets about the power he actually has. It might be easy to see him turning to litigation as a way to redress his grievances. Or turn to his new family, spend time with his new son, it's easier than facing all the obstacles of staying connected to his son in Florida.

In situations like this, we can't expect our children to provide the guidance, instead it must come from the adults. For kids the allure of the immediate - like baseball games, dates, dances are important to kids. And developmental stages -like being a teenager and actively rejecting parents - can act as a smoke screen, obscuring the needs kids still have for their parents. It's up to the parents to assume their kids still need them and to act accordingly. (Even teens will admit in my office)

Finally, let's turn to those children of divorce who have now grown up as a way to understand the impact of move aways. What happens when children lose access to a parent and then grow up? What happens to that empty spot in their psyche? Often it lies quiescent for years and then re-emerges when a child, now grown, tries to get married or make a commitment. Or has a child of their own. Or it may be present in a diffuse way for years - such as the young man who can't seem to develop any initiative. Can't get his life going. These are examples of how a parent's absence can be felt.

To illustrate this let me share a story from our newspaper, the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Written last year by Jill Jordan Sieder entitled "Memories mean he's never totally Absent". At age 29, the Author recounts her parents' divorce at age 5, then moving away, and seeing her father with less and less frequency.

"How fatherlessness has affected us is hard to know.....Dad has faded rapidly as a force in my adult life; he has rarely visited me in 20 years. It struck me how little he knew about me and the times I'd longed for him; ;maybe, I thought, he just doesn't care. I began to view him more as

a kindly uncle -someone you're glad enough to see, but don't really need."

She goes on to write her father about her feelings .... and his response included the sentiment: He thought she really didn't care anymore.

As I sit in my office and listen to people's stories and think of the sadness that can come from missed communications, this example seems most tragic. Each felt they had lost the other. And under the circumstances, it would be hard to blame either. Ultimately, however, it must be left to the parents and to society, to create an atmosphere that is conducive for contact between parent and child

Ultimately, nothing's changed.

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Presented at the 10th National Conference - Children's Rights Council
April 27, 1996.

Distance and Divorce -- The Move Away Case

Divorced parents know about irony and paradox. The juxtaposition of opposites and the contradiction of similarities can haunt many divorced parents . The complications of divorce are largely related to the greatest gifts of the marriage: the children. Much time and money can be spent in the name of the best interests of the child. After an excruciating period of pain and torture, the actual legal termination of a marriage may give only temporary relief. Perhaps it stands as a legal pause, the end of one paragraph and the start of another. A transition that involves the whole family. For each member of the family there is a different meaning. Parents are relieved/sad that their marriage is over; children may be relieved/sad as well, though for different reasons. And while the legal change may appear crisp and clean, the psychological transition is not. Sometimes the two get confused. Likely, it will take another year for the psychological transition to be complete; maybe longer. But the reality of divorce means each parent will reassess how they want their life to proceed. There may be a new partner, new interests, a new job.

Regardless, for the children involved, everything and nothing has changed. The divorce has finalized what might have been a long process. They hope it will end the fighting. They may now live in a new city, share a home with a new step-parent, and have new schools and friends. Nevertheless, these children still have the same mother and father. In their minds they still look to the same individuals for support and sustenance. They don't really want to take sides, nor do they generally want to give up a parent either. The legal process cannot overcome the power of their attachment. They were given two specific parents at birth, a bond that no man nor court can put asunder.

The attachment that children exhibit for their parents from birth, and vice versa, is the beginning of a developmental process that continues throughout a person's life. Within this process comes the psychological foundation for the child upon which they will build their own self, their unique combination of nature and nurture. The more solid the connection between the child and parent, then the easier it is for the child to piece together the building blocks and move into adolescence and adulthood. And so even in divorce, it is still incumbent upon each parent to help the child in the positive connection with the opposite parent. For divorced parents that means providing a circumstance that is as supportive as can be possible for the other parent, whom you divorced because you couldn't tolerate them. You want your child to love and respect the person you can't. There are moments when divorce asks parents to exhibit a level of maturity that few of us know easily.

Most kids can understand divorce: Mom and Dad don't love each other any more. They don't like it, they feel powerless, it makes them hurt and angry, but they can get the concept. No longer having a parent nearby is more confusing. From an adult perspective it's easy to envision a parent who moves away in order to start a new life. Indeed, it is easier for the two parents to live

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apart. Many of the psychological wounds can be sealed over more quickly. Easier for the parents. Unfortunately, it can be worse for the children. Regardless who did the moving, it doesn't compute for kids. Or when they do get it to compute inside their psyche, the equations are unsettling. Dad moved because he doesn't like me. We're moving because Mom was awful. Why should I have to leave my parent just because my step-parent has a job elsewhere? Now unable to see the non-custodial parent on a regular basis, they are left to cope as best they can. To replace that empty spot within their psyche. To try and make some sense of the events. Can a sympathetic teacher, interested coach or friendly neighbor replace a parent? When a child needs someone to share with, can a non-parent do just as well? Second best is better than nothing.

Individual circumstances will vary, of course. But for the child of two well meaning and divorced parents, maintaining an active relationship with both parents is a challenge. And if those parents want to develop a confident, mature child, then they both have a problem as well. It may be easier for them not to live nearby, but not for their child. (The reverse may also be true. Living close by may be easier for the child, but will be more difficult for the parents.) When looking at a child of divorce who has a parent far away, it may appear that all is well. They may appear happy, are not in trouble, have friends. This will act to reassure parents, and other adults who wish that divorce were simpler than it is. As if what isn't seen, doesn't exist. What is happening inside their developing psyche? Adults who remember their parents' divorce can give us some clues. Recently, in the Atlanta Journal Constitution journalist Jill Jordan Sieder reflected upon her own life, living away from her father after age five. (1) Looking back, and then looking forward, she writes:

> "I used to think divorce was something that hurts for a while, and then you get over it. But now, at 29, I'm not so sure...
>
> How fatherlessness has affected us is hard to know....Dad has faded rapidly as a force in my adult life....he has rarely visited me in 20 years..... It struck me how little he knew about me and the times I'd often longed for him; maybe, I thought, he just doesn't care...Recently, though, I realized his absence was still causing me anguish. So I wrote to him... (and he said) *he thought I really didn't care anymore.*"(Italics mine)

Each had come to believe that the other no longer cared. The attachment is hard to maintain, and distance acts to weaken and dilute the connection. Questions arise and go unanswered. Those spontaneous moments, both silly and serious, that act to bind us together, are lost. What started in creation, can become stilted and forced. And as a result, children struggle. Perhaps they have trouble making the leap into adulthood or experience recurring pain in adult life, triggered by their own marriage or parenthood. It's not until later that much of the loss becomes evident.

As a psychiatrist working with both adults and children, I have had the opportunity to meet with individuals who are involved in divorce in all different ways. Parents who divorce, children of divorce, adults who grew up in a divorced household. Each has their individual story. And all have a similar story. The loss is bad enough, divorce is painful and difficult under the best of circumstances. What proceeds afterwards can be even worse. If seeing both parents everyday in the same home is the best, then seeing each weekly might be second best. So where does seeing one parent daily and seeing the other every couple months or twice a year fit in?

Traditionally, the law and forensic psychiatry have favored the concept of the sanctity of the custodial family. Some of the best minds in the community felt that the establishment of a

solid family would provide the basis for a child's growth and development. And any intrusion or interference, including continued arguing, would further wound the child. The power and decision making authority is given to the custodial parent, and the non-custodial parent ....is noncustodial, non-influential, and non-considered by the law. Although the damage resultant from continued combat is well documented, the issue of developing a step-family with the exclusion of a non-custodial parent is more complicated. For the children there is a loss. For the non-custodial parent there is a loss. For the custodial parent there is a loss. No one really escapes, despite the illusion. Within the law of the land there may be a certain logic to this approach, but within the law of the heart, this logic doesn't hold. Children still need both parents. As the divorced family progresses one parent or another may make mistakes that act to distance a child from a parent. The custodial parent may be over controlling in their gatekeeper role, the noncustodial parent may withdraw . And since the law has now joined the family, it too is not immune from making mistakes. Forcing choices, continuing the win/lose paradigm, negotiating visitation as if it were a commodity not a need, all create an atmosphere against a child's development. Distance from one parent or another.

Whether a family comes out of its divorce with a good arrangement or a difficult one, it is still necessary for the parents to implement what is best for the children. Both the custodial and non-custodial parent must carefully consider how they will act in order to assist the child in maintaining contact and attachment with their other parent. For the custodial parent this means making specific arrangements for the appreciation of the other parent. And for the non-custodial parent, it requires initiative and repeated risking to maintain the evolving relationship.

For children of divorce, absence may not make the heart grow fonder; until it's too late.

1 Jill Jordan Sieder "Memories mean he's never totally absent", Atlanta Journal Constitution, May 29, 1995.